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[COMMENT] EXTERNAL ACTION IN THE UN SYSTEM

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[Comment] External action in the UN system

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The United Nations General Assembly on 3 May 2011 voted on the participation of the European Union in the work of the United Nations, granting the Union increased rights as a quasi full member of the Assembly.

This outcome has been welcomed by decision-makers and commentators as a breakthrough for effective external action, assumed to follow from increased EU unity. But research has shown that speaking with a single EU voice in the UN system might not be the silver bullet it is thought to be.

The Assembly approved a Resolution granting the EU most of the rights reserved for full members (i.e. states). It now has the right to speak, make proposals and submit amendments, raise points of order, and circulate documents. The Resolution stops short of giving the EU the right to vote, but clearly its status is much improved.

It itself, recognising a regional organisation as a quasi full member is an important step for the UN. With most of its institutions and agencies set up not long after World War II, it is a decidedly nation based system. Adopting this resolution, which also includes an opening for other regional organisations to follow the EU's lead, signifies a turning point, however modest it might seem at first.

From the perspective of the EU, it is an equally important recognition of its growing importance as an actor in global affairs. With European Council President Herman Van Rompuy and High Representative for foreign affairs Catherine Ashton taking up



EU bloc mentality can in some cases lead to negative results.

(Photo: tomdz)

seats beside other world leaders, the UN is perceived to validate this trend.

The outcome of the vote has also been welcomed by decision-makers and commentators as a breakthrough for effective external action in the multilateral context of the General Assembly. Crucially, it is assumed that increased coordination between its member states will enable the EU to play a more important role in global affairs. Put differently: speaking with a single EU voice will improve the effectiveness of its external action.

Assuming EU unity will automatically lead to effective external action is far from unproblematic.

In recent years, academic research has shown that the EU's bloc mentality can in some cases lead to negative results. Key examples are Karen Smith's (London School of Economics) soft balancing against EU positions by the Global South in the Human Rights Council and Robert Kissack's (Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals) research on the unwillingness of non-European countries to ratify International Labour Organization Conventions containing high, European standards.

In both cases, EU unity triggers hostility from the developing world, thus diminishing its effectiveness. The 'iconic meaning' of ever more unity seems to have blinded the EU from these negative effects following from its desire to speak with a single voice.

The basic assumption that EU unity will automatically lead to effective external action has come to the fore with former UN deputy general secretary Mark Malloch Brown commenting that the next step for the EU is to seek quasi full membership in other UN institutions. However, this underestimates the heterogeneity of the UN system and its impact on the effectiveness of EU unity.

While it is reasonable to expect increased EU coordination to strengthen its position and impact in the General Assembly where decisions are made by (two-thirds) majority vote, this is not always the case in the highly diverse UN system. Other institutions follow different procedures to reach an outcome, wherein the importance of EU unity might be secondary to its ability to reach out and compromise on its common position during negotiations, e.g. in the case of consensus voting.

This is one lesson that seems to be overlooked when assuming EU unity will automatically lead to effective external action in the UN system.

This is not to say that reverting back to 27 independent national positions would be a better option, far from it. Acting as a Union allows EU member states to influence global affairs to an extent none of them are still capable of independently. There is ample evidence of EU unity improving its effectiveness and impact in multilateral institutions.

The fact remains that speaking with a single EU voice does potentially also entail negative effects for its position and impact in the UN system. It is not a silver bullet which automatically leads to more effective external action and we know little about the underlying conditions informing the potential malign effects.

The EU would be well advised to take a reflexive stance towards speaking with a single voice during multilateral negotiations, as there might sometimes be more effective means to increase its position and impact as an actor in global affairs.

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